

THE INCREDIBLE IN JACOBEOAN TRAGEDY

by Clifford Leech

Not only does all drama include the incredible: it is itself incredible. The difference between Jacobean tragedy and the most homespun naturalistic play is one of degree, not of kind. Coleridge spoke of our willingly suspending the disbelief that we would otherwise feel: we should note that his "willing" does not mean "acquiescent"; it implies something more active. Although he was speaking of narrative poetry, his useful phrase is commonly and rightly applied also to the theater. According to Sidney, the poet does not lie because he affirms nothing. I shall quarrel with that, but it contains the partial truth that one reason for going to the theater or reading a novel or a narrative poem is to delight in the experience of fiction. Clearly there are other reasons too: we may go to the theater, for example, to partake in a communal rite; we seek out art, where we can find it, because it manifests the idea of form, of control of the flux which we wallow in and are terrified by; moreover, we find in major theater and in all major art a more complex embodiment of what we can recognize as "truth" than is available to us in any other way. I shall speak about this last matter in more detail later, but for the moment I want to dwell on the notion of "fiction" as it applies particularly to the theater.

The Greeks hid the fictional element to some extent. Although Aristotle in Chapter IX of *The Poetics* said that the tragic dramatists might use invented stories and that many in the audience would not be familiar with the traditional stories customarily used, it can hardly be a coincidence that every one of the extant tragedies uses a traditional story. This suggests that it was this kind of tragic writing that exercised the greatest hold on the audience's response. And I think Aristotle probably underestimated the general level of knowledge. I have heard two educated ladies, sitting behind me in a theater in England during a performance of Jean Cocteau's *La machine infernale*, a version of the Oedipus story, pondering on when Orestes would intervene. In Athens as well as elsewhere in Hellas, the common knowledge was probably as vague as that, but the sense that what was being seen was of the very blood and bone and sinew of the audience's history was surely strong. The stories the dramatists used probably functioned more powerfully for the Greeks than the stories in the Bible function for the greater part of the reading and viewing

public today: the contemporary knowledge of the Bible is generally vague enough, and its stories are hardly believed; yet there is a resonance about them that impels a kind of acceptance. Moreover, the fact that the theater was a temple of Dionysus, that the actors were masked and most formally costumed, and, at least in the later years, were raised to a height well above the level of the orchestra, that the priests of the god were present, helped to make the play into a rite rather than a document of life as we know it.

So, too, in the medieval miracle plays, when they had moved outside the church and had indeed begun to use frankly fictional elements in certain episodes (most famously, the Mak story in the *Secunda Pastorum*), the basic story yet remained the essential one for medieval man, and the presentation of the scriptural characters in the persons of living actors was given warrant through the pictures and statues and stained glass windows that brought the story home on every Sunday, on every festival of the church. Even so, it was a pretense: manifestly what was happening now was a shadow of what once happened. "*Certum est quia impossibile*," said Tertullian. One could have the pleasure of witnessing both truth and the incredible. One knew that the persons of the sacred story were being impersonated by one's neighbors, conceivably one's friends. One knew that Christ was not dying in this particular place; one was playing a game as well as taking part in a solemn presentation of what one believed had, once upon a time, indeed happened. This would surely be true of a miracle play, even though its effect would be reinforced by the fact that the Mass was seen as in truth a repetition of the Last Supper.

With the Elizabethans and Jacobean the case is obviously very different, although there are shadings. For the most part they used invented stories. Of course, I do not mean, in most cases, stories invented by the dramatists themselves: rather, they drew on prose fiction of the Renaissance or on legends (like that of *Hamlet*) remote from their sense of heritage, or on a kind of history so deeply in the past (as in *Macbeth*) that only the occasional spectator would be likely to know anything of it in advance. The great exception is provided by the history plays of the 1590s, where we come nearest in the time of the English Renaissance to the type of situation which I have suggested was the basic one in the Greek theater. But that kind of dramatic writing hardly survived the turn of the century. Shakespeare abandoned English history (apart from the curious addendum to his career provided by *Henry VIII*) after he had completed his series of plays extending from the reign of Richard II to the coming of the Tudors, and, after an excursion into Roman history in *Julius Caesar*, went on to use in his major tragedies stories altogether remote from the sense of a heritage which could impose itself to the point where the fictional nature of drama could be felt as minimal. "What's Hamlet to him or he to Hamlet?" is a question that might have been put, in an after-theater session in the tavern, in relation to Burbage. Chapman had a historical figure in Bussy d'Ambois, but the story would not have been

intimately known, and much of this play is pure fiction. When, some years later, he continued the story in *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, he frankly wrote fiction, and in his dedication of the play he took his stand on the idea that the drama's concern was with "things like truth," not with a mere record of history. Webster's *Duchess* had a real-life original, as had his *Vittoria*, but no more than *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* did these figures anteriorly exist in the consciousness of the audience. Shakespeare in *Othello*, Middleton in *The Changeling* and *Women Beware Women*, drew on existing stories, but the stories would not be generally known. T. S. Eliot, in his introduction to the Tudor Translations edition of Seneca's plays, pointed out that one of the major differences between Elizabethan-Jacobean drama and that of Seneca was that the Renaissance audience, in watching its own drama, had the peculiar thrill of not knowing the end. It is true that Shakespeare, after *Macbeth*, turned back for two plays to Roman history, feeling I believe the need for the firm support of historical or allegedly historical fact after the impasse and anguish that *Macbeth* had led him to. In *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* he produced masterpieces of a new sort; he added, I believe, a codicil in the more-or-less fictional *Timon of Athens* (yet derived, like the three major Roman plays, basically from Plutarch): the date, of course, has been disputed; and he went on from there to the frankest of fiction in the romances that came almost at the end of his career—there accepting, however, other brakes on his imagination.

In the circumstances I have presented as operating in Elizabethan-Jacobean times, the idea of the incredible had to emerge with increasing nakedness. There is indeed a suggestion of a frank recognition of this in *Hamlet*. When the Prince cannot quite withhold amazement upon seeing the First Player weep over Hecuba, we have the basic puzzlement many of us often feel when we are inordinately moved in the theater, for this is true with both actors and spectators. Shakespeare scholars ought to be actors. They can give up this ancillary craft, except in the lecture room, at my age or, as I did, much earlier, but they should have had the First Player's experience, the experience of being in anguished relation with the imagined characters they are presenting and the characters intimately associated with them. In a university where I served for many years there was a "Staff Dramatic Society": it furnished a splendid means of making my colleagues and myself more deeply aware of the theatrical situation. We should pity ourselves if we are content to be exclusively textual critics or fancy-spinners in the study. Thus *Hamlet* takes us a degree further into the idea of the incredible as essential to the play, and to human life generally. The Prince can hardly believe that Troy matters so much, yet it manifestly does.

So in *King Lear* the same idea is recurrent throughout. We are brought up so persistently against the terrible that it is not surprising that the dramatic characters themselves express incredulity. Cornwall's Second and Third Ser-

vants, when Regan and her husband have left after the blinding of Gloucester, have at first only perplexed words to speak: the evil they have just seen cannot be contemplated as part of the rational human story:

SEC. SERV. I'll never care what wickedness I do
If this man come to good.
THIRD SERV. If she live long,
And, in the end, meet the old course of death,
Women will all turn monsters. (III.vii.99-102)

In the next scene we first meet Edgar, who is consoling himself with the thought that his fortunes are now at the lowest, so that any change must be for the better. Immediately he sees his blinded father being led on by the Old Man: in a moment he realizes that so long as life continues there is a possibility of yet greater disaster than any we have hitherto known. This is the instant of true *anagnorisis* for him. Nothing, Edgar now knows, is truly incredible, but the lesson has been hard to learn. And at the very end of the play there is, in Edgar's last four lines, a delicate balancing of the notion of incredibility with the quiet acceptance of the fact that the incredible can compel belief:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young,
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (V.iii.325-328)

"This is beyond belief" is what is implied: "we may, as human beings, suffer much, but not all this; nevertheless, one of us, the old King himself, has suffered it." A similar thing is apparent at the ends of *Othello* and *Macbeth*. The concluding lines of *Othello*, spoken by Lodovico, emphasize the sense of incredulity that must appal the onlookers now that they realize what Iago has done. He addresses Iago first, then Gratiano, then Cassio:

O Spartan dog!
More fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea.
Look on the tragic loading of this bed;
This is thy work; the object poisons sight;
Let it be hid. Gratiano, keep the house,
And seize upon the fortunes of the Moor,
For they succeed on you. To you, lord governor,
Remains the censure of this hellish villain,
The time, the place, the torture; O! enforce it.
Myself will straight aboard, and to the state
This heavy act with heavy heart relate. (V.ii.360-370)

Of course, his words are terribly impotent. Iago still lives; they can give him a "protracted death," but he has survived Othello and Desdemona and his own wife who delated on him. And the "state," which will hear the heavy relation of what has happened, can do nothing. All that Lodovico, or any-

one, can say is "How can these things be?" It is in some measure an echo of Laertes' cry "Do you see this, O God?" when he sees his sister mad, but in the more reticent play of *Othello* God is left out of the matter. In *Macbeth*, what we are perhaps most conscious of in Malcolm's last speech is his total inability to understand the predicament in which Macbeth found himself. "This dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" is no fitting epitaph for the man and wife we have known. In *Richard III* Shakespeare could make Richmond say "The bloody dog is dead," for he was reinforced by the Tudor myth and by the overt drive of the early histories (whatever reservations we may now feel), but Malcolm, we must surely think, is impertinent. The truth about Macbeth is either incredible—as it surely is, except that we are forced to believe it—or it is to be shrugged off in Malcolm's fashion.

In Bartlett's *Concordance* the word 'incredible' is recorded only once, and that triflingly from *The Taming of the Shrew*, but 'impossibility' and 'impossible' together occupy approximately a whole column. There is throughout Shakespeare's tragedies, and indeed in his other plays, a sense that what is presented defies belief. And that is as it should be. We have seen that in the theatrical situation from the Renaissance on we are confronted by what is largely or totally an invented story: this makes us all the more conscious that the play is being presented by actors who have learned and rehearsed their parts. Even when there is improvisation (and all theater to some extent includes that), the principle of pretense is still governing. The thing presented is manifestly separated from the normal current of life. It is an invention, and if we are to come into proper relation with it, we must very firmly *will* our suspension of disbelief. But there are always, indeed, degrees of difficulty. Much of the drama of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was much further away from the life outside the theater than was the best drama of the Renaissance. When in 1923 William Archer published his study *The Old Drama and the New*, he felt he could repudiate much of England's dramatic past, could insist that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century drama was on the whole morally and intellectually more respectable. What he did was to cling to the middle-class image that dominated the English theater of his time (even in Shaw's plays) and to feel that this, and this only, was "life." We should know better by now, and Professor J. W. Lever in the opening pages of his book *The Tragedy of State* (1971) has reminded us that Jacobean tragedy offered us a convincing picture of the life of its time. A reviewer of this book in *The Times Literary Supplement* felt able to suggest: "But the dramatists were generally writing about Italy, not about a more favoured land" (I am paraphrasing, but I think not maliciously): he should have imagined taking a walk round London, watching an execution or two, glancing at the withering heads on the Bridge. We should be able to realize that the cruelty and the violence which Renaissance tragedy presents were not only an essential part of the fabric of life in that time but have always been so,

even in our most genteel days—in the underworld, in the secret chamber, in the execution shed, at the barricades, on the battlefield, and between the lines. We cry “incredible,” but we now have every reason to know that these things are with us.

It will be noted that in the previous paragraph I have shifted the ground of the argument. It is difficult not to do that, and probably right that it should be done. On the one hand, Renaissance drama is more obviously “invented” than anything that went before; on the other, I believe it cleaves more closely to life than any drama did until the major plays of Ibsen and Strindberg and Chekhov—and these writers did not come nearer to actuality than we can find it presented in *King Lear* and *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Changeling* and *The Broken Heart*. Let us again look squarely at our own time: we have lived through so much of civil violence and international war and racial and religious persecution (with hardly any race or religion innocent); we have seen the quasi-illiteracy of those who proclaim their rightness; rape and murder and maiming have become mere fodder for the gutter-press, for film, increasingly for television; indeed, in comparison with other things, a mere rape begins to appear as almost a friendly gesture, as it was not for Shakespeare or for the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Oh, we do what we can, of course: many countries, though not all, have abolished capital punishment or have allowed it to lapse; our best legislators, whatever their recurrent imperfections, are among the fine flower of our civilization. Yet there are, particularly, younger scholars among us who affirm that Shakespeare's Jacobean contemporaries (they do not customarily lay hands on *him*) overdo things. They might remember that Webster, on the whole their particular bugbear, could object to the notion of “overdoing” it, with special reference to stage-playing. I am assuming what is generally assumed, that he contributed to the 1615 edition of Overbury's *Characters*. In the description of “An excellent Actor,” he echoed Hamlet's advice to the players, affirming that such an actor

doth not strive to make nature monstrous, she is often seen in the same Scæne with him, but neither on stilts nor Crutches; and for his voice, tis not lower then the prompter, nor lower then the Foile and Target. By his action he fortifies morall precepts with example; for what we see him personate, we thinke truely done before us.

And he did indeed find “excellent” actors, for he added this final note to *The White Devil* on its publication in 1612:

For the action of the play, twas generally well, and I dare affirme, with the Joint testimony of some of their owne quality, (for the true imitation of life, without striving to make nature a monster) the best that ever became them.

Two years later, in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson was to make his Scrivener say of the author: “He is loth to make Nature afraid in his plays,” having just referred to the absence of “a servant-monster i' the Fair”

(with an obvious reference to Caliban). With such disclaimers, can we really believe that these contemporaries of Shakespeare wanted, essentially, to overdo things? Perhaps Shakespeare himself did, in his final romances, for special reasons; and so did Fletcher, wanting to make his audience gasp, which he did brilliantly. But this did not occur in Jacobean tragedy at its most authoritative.

Some ten years ago, in introducing a collection of critical essays on Marlowe, I felt I had to argue that this dramatist, who in so many ways (but in a different kind of writing) anticipated the frank recognition of evil that is characteristic of Jacobean tragedy, is now more available to us because we have had so much violence in our century: there were Auschwitz and Dresden and Hiroshima. Now there are many more recent examples. The excesses of Tamburlaine grow milder, less incredible. That some of our colleagues seem to balk at what Jacobean tragedy offers apparently arises from a current form of academic sterilization, which tries to keep literature strictly within the confines of a university department.

Yet it is understandable that the Jacobeans and Carolines wanted to pass on from the incredible to the apparently impossible. They knew, after all, that the incredible was possible. "How far can we take them with us?" seems to underlie what they often present. Shakespeare himself was to pass from the more or less realistic manner of *Hamlet* and *Othello* to the mad-dened worlds of *Lear* and *Macbeth*. Lear can only with difficulty believe in his two elder daughters' perfidy or, for that matter, in his youngest daughter's constancy: he is incredulous of the good as well as of the evil. We have already seen the limits of Malcolm's credulity, of his power of believing.

Next to Shakespeare, we commonly think of Webster and Middleton and Ford as primary among the Jacobean writers of tragedy. Yet Webster and Ford have recently aroused much incredulity. Webster, who rebuked "overdoing," is now himself rebuked for "overdoing." But we all know that there are people like Vittoria, ready for murder for their own gain, sensual enough (as many of us are) yet splendid if they can die with Vittoria's almost final recognizing words:

My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,
Is driven I know not whither. (V.vi.248-249)

Even the pander Flamineo gives us a cue for admiration when he ends with:

'Tis well there's yet some goodness in my death,
My life was a black charnel: I have caught
An everlasting cold. I have lost my voice
Most irrecoverably ... (V.vi.269-272)

There is a "beyond good and evil" when we hear this kind of utterance.

That brings us to the question of authority in speech. Hamlet, before he bade the First Player a temporary farewell in Act II, scene ii, was moved by him. We are moved by Webster's Duchess and his Vittoria when we, in our turn, see them as performers expressing grief. What we see in them is an image of human beings at the ultimate. When that happens, we have little difficulty in suspending disbelief. The reason is, partly, that we are submissively responsive to eloquent words: it is the kind of eloquence that the ancients talked of, when they saw the rhetorician as basically the good man: even Flamineo is "good" when he comes to the point of *anagnorisis*.

Nothing is more bogus than the idea that we often get from our students, that "rhetoric" implies something false. The opposite is deep in our bones, as they should learn, although they so often yield to a rhetoric that is corrupt. The priest or shaman operates on us; we cannot resist the appeal to our deepest sense of the frightening cry. Indeed we have to be careful, for there are many such cries that are bogus in the extreme, many cries that invite our easy acquiescence without sufficiently demonstrating their fidelity to what we, in our innermost hearts, know the truth to be. On the other hand, we can, and should, turn deaf ears to such cries if they become a mere matter of routine: there is a special compulsion if the words used, though to some extent echoing old ones, have a measure of difference from a known liturgy. That gave a special strength to the Greeks, for they could vary the legend, could make well-known characters react in a new way, as it may operate in the Roman church if it can make the vernacular Mass authoritative through well chosen words. The Jacobean had an advantage there, because their stories had not fully established themselves. The echoes of the past are important: "I am Antony yet"; "I am Duchess of Malfi still": these obviously derive from Seneca's "*Medea superest*," but they are spoken in a new way, a fresh language. We need words that remind us yet impinge on us anew. Yet today we are confronted by a drive towards the idea of the unimportance of words. "Go in for rapid reading," we are told, "for in that way you will read more." In that case we are likely to respond far less fully to what we read. In the theater, fortunately, that cannot operate: we have to attend, and to listen at the pace of the speaking voice. Yet one has to admit that in some modish places there is a cult of the grunt and the gabble instead of proper speech.

There is a splendid use of 'impossible' in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* when Beatrice-Joanna says:

Why, 'tis impossible thou canst be so wicked,
 Or shelter such a cunning cruelty,
 To make his death the murderer of my honour!
 Thy language is so bold and vicious,
 I cannot see which way I can forgive it
 With any modesty. (III.iv.120-125)

There she so slowly comes to a recognition of the price that De Flores is demanding for the killing of Piracquo. But it must be no less obvious that De Flores has been incredulous too. He can hardly believe it when, in Act II, scene ii, Beatrice-Joanna calls him by his name, touches his afflicted face, and gives him the charge that will lead him to her bosom. The dramatist, as so often, by emphasizing the character's own incredulity, makes us share in his astonishment and thus modifies the incredulity that we are bound to feel. Edmund in *King Lear* similarly wonders at his deception of his father and his brother in Act I, scene ii: this was blunted in a production some years ago at Stratford, Ontario, when the director decided to make Edgar drunk in this scene in order to gain a sense of verisimilitude: we have to learn, as the director on that occasion did not, that the incredible can be accepted as truth. Similarly, at the end Edmund, near the moment of death, feels he must wonder at the fact that two princesses have fallen in love with him. We can all feel this kind of astonishment: how can, we ask, people be so taken in by us? We are deceivers ever, of course, but is it not astonishing how successful we are? By the end of the scene between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores she has to recognize the actuality of the "incredible":

BEA. Vengeance begins;
Murder I see is followed by more sins.
Was my creation in the womb so curs'd,
It must engender with a viper first?
DE F. Come, rise, and shroud your blushes in my bosom;
[Raises her.]
Silence is one of pleasure's best receipts:
Thy peace is wrought for ever in this yielding.
'Las, how the turtle pants! Thou'lt love anon
What thou so fear'st and faint'st to venture on. (III.iv.163-171)

She can hardly bring herself to believe what is happening, yet she has to believe.

Una Ellis-Fermor in one of her major books, *The Frontiers of Drama* (1945), argued that dramatists frequently press beyond the normal limits of the dramatic, demanding of their medium what it would appear to deprive them of. Similarly Lessing pointed out that it was the way of poets to make "*kleine Angriffe*" on the realm of pictorial art. This desire to go beyond shows itself in a different way when the Jacobean and Caroline dramatists press on to a quasi-ultimate in their demands that the audience should suspend its disbelief. Beaumont and Fletcher played with the idea of incest in *A King and No King*, but finally let the audience off by revealing, as they had indeed hinted earlier, that Arbaces and Panthea were not truly brother and sister. But their splendid successor Ford did not let his audience off in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. How it reacted we do not know, for there is no evidence as to the popularity of his plays, even in the limited

sense possible to the private theater—though we do know that he was valued by some discerning individuals. Certainly, however, he set out to defy their expectations, not only in *'Tis Pity* but in that major enigmatic play *Perkin Warbeck* (so odd and yet so outstanding an addition to the “English history” genre) and in the much abused *The Fancies Chaste and Noble*, where an elderly marquis collects several girls to do him pleasure in the minimal way possible to him. I have suggested elsewhere that Ford lost his courage at the end: it could have been one of his truly outstanding writings if he had refrained from finally suggesting that the marquis was merely concerned with “educating” the girls in a quite conventional way. As things turn out, Ford makes use of a Fletcherian sleight, without preparing for it in Fletcher’s way and without Fletcher’s characteristic shrug. The earlier passages, where his nephew Troylo-Savelli argues that the marquis is comparatively innocent when his behavior is compared with that of other nobles in Italy, make the situation forcefully suggest the condition of the impotent, but still desiring, man. The abuse that the play has received is, I think, an example of the scholars’ failure to recognize how the drama of that time truly mirrors the way things are.

Yet, as *hommes moyen sensuels*, can we regard the endings, and much else in them, of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Broken Heart* as other than “incredible”? Yet what they do is just to go one step beyond what we have from Shakespeare’s tragedies and those of his immediate contemporaries. The English Renaissance drama takes always its characteristic bent from Marlowe. “How much of reality can they be made to take?” is the question, and we must bear in mind that every spectator in that time, as in ours, has to take much. So Calantha in *The Broken Heart* wills herself to death, Giovanni in *'Tis Pity* enters finally with Annabella’s heart on his dagger: this is a fine excess; we may even have an impulse to laugh, as a relief to ourselves, but the impulse is likely to be quelled through the authority of Ford’s verse—if it is properly spoken.

There are occasions also in comedy where the incredible reaches a point where a chill comes upon us. In Massinger’s *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, Sir Giles Overreach goes mad, and everyone knows how in Kean’s portrayal this induced horror. Yet it is not mere “sensationalism”: seen in retrospect, his controlled aggressiveness in the earlier scenes marks him as one who had steeled himself into a sense of security, with an underlying feverishness, and he was driven to madness when the gentry took over his “new way” of conduct.

Yet, as I have indicated, beyond incredibility there lies the truth that these dramas have to offer us. They present a manifestly fictional story; they will us to accept it, even though all the time they make ever greater demands on our credulity. Sometimes, of course, as in Fletcher’s smaller plays, and frequently in Massinger and Shirley, they go beyond what we

can possibly relate to our experience of the actual, and then we say: "This is fun, but it relates only to the theater, not to life outside." We similarly react to the *pièce bien faite*: Pinero's bravura *The Gay Lord Quex* is only just round the corner. Ford, on the other hand, astonishes us but makes us truly wonder. If we cannot believe in Giovanni in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* or in the noble Calantha of *The Broken Heart* or in the equally "incredible" Perkin Warbeck, we ought to feel inclined to question our own limits of imagination. None of us, surely, has the effrontery to deny the "truth to life" of Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Timon—although of course each of these figures is presented with the "heightening" (to use Dryden's term) that belongs to the theater. Today some of our younger scholars can accept the truth of Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores, and can credit the many devoted-to-evil figures of *Women Beware Women*. Yet Webster and Ford embarrass them, for these dramatists make the darkness more visible. They should indeed recognize that the "incredible" is what we live with.

That is, however, only the half of it, probably less than half. Evil does certainly lie beyond and beneath the superficialities of what we pretend is actuality. By "we" I particularly mean "we academics." The Jacobean and Carolines (though when I say "Caroline," I probably mean only Ford) knew much more than this. Not only evil but good lies beyond. Calantha in *The Broken Heart* comes near to being as good as you can get: it is as difficult to believe in her as in any representative of evil, as may be true in relation to Cordelia's constancy. It was the way of these dramatists to go to the frontier, and Shakespeare was among them. In the matter of evil, no one surpassed him in his Iago. Remember that Iago survived beyond the end of the play. Of course, he was going to be given the protracted death that Flecker in *Hassan* determined on for his two lovers: nevertheless, he confronts us at the end as an enduring embodiment of evil.

And this is the way that art presents truth—in the exaggerations of Michelangelo most gloriously. It is all fiction, however much it may be derived from history or legend, but its story and its characters have relation to our lives. Chapman was right in declaring that his *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois* presented "things like truth," however fictional his particular action and persons might be. I do not think, however, that he was right in believing, as he and Jonson did, that this could involve "excitation to virtue." The thing that matters is the presentation of truth in the fullest sense of the word—that is, through fiction, which can include far more of our experience than simple "documentary" ever can. The major work can in a sense be morally fortifying because it makes us see more truly, makes us credit the incredible; and it will do this because it takes us to the ultimate term. Only in this way has art a moral sense. Let us think of the major novelists of this century—of, for example, Conrad in *Nostromo*, Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*, Malcolm Lowry in *Under the*

Volcano—who present men at the end of their tether who paradoxically achieve a kind of existence that seems to make sense of all they have blunderingly done before.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to urge on you the idea that, when a major Jacobean or Caroline dramatist drives us beyond the normal limit where we can suspend our disbelief, he is inviting us to do that in order that we may see more deeply into the facts of experience. There is no one, except Büchner in *Danton's Death*, who has come near Chapman in *The Tragedy of Byron* in making us so aware of what happens to a man when he is on the brink of ordered death. There is no one but Shakespeare who has so fully explored the idea of suicide (not even Montaigne in that age saw around it so far), no one but Middleton who so thoroughly envisioned the fact of killing, no one but Shakespeare and Webster and the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* who so terribly presented the impulsion to murder.

Yet the incredibility remains. We go home to supper and bed, and do not really believe that the robber, the rapist, the murderer will come upon us. Yet there is nothing in Jacobean or Caroline drama that goes beyond what lies outside the window. We have noted that, according to Sidney, the poet "nothing affirmeth," and now we have to say: "Alas, he does." These dramatists give us no characters or events beyond what we have come to know. At the same time they offer a measure of control—in diction, in structure, in "readiness"—that enables us to face the terror of it all.

I have not, you will notice, referred anywhere to the alleged upward movement in the tragedies of Shakespeare or his contemporaries. Hamlet dies, and Fortinbras, for what he is worth, comes. Othello will be replaced by the good-willing but easily replaceable Cassio. Lear has the fumbling Albany to succeed him. Macbeth has Malcolm. Who can rejoice in any of these changes? Can, for example, Fortinbras match what Ophelia has said of Hamlet:

O! what a noble mind is here o'erthrown:
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword;
 The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 The observ'd of all observers, quite, quite down!
 And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
 That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
 Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
 Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;
 That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
 Blasted with ecstasy: O! woe is me,
 To have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (III.i.159-170)

This is both a highly formal and a beautifully anguished passage, in sharp

counterpart to the almost incoherent and certainly unformalized "nunnery scene" that has just preceded. It was movingly, but still surely wrongly, replaced by mere sobbing in Lord Olivier's *Hamlet* film. I have urged, also, that we can find nothing "sanguine" in the ends of *Othello*, *Lear*, or *Macbeth*. Instead of that, we should come to grips with what we call "fiction" and should enlarge our vision through something that we may ultimately accept as transcending fiction, as providing us with a truth that must perplex, astonish us, that will give us the shock that every academic or reader or spectator ought to have. Each of us will more easily come to that if he reads or sees along with a recognition of the century we live in.

Yet I have not touched at all on what you doubtless expected—ghosts, apparitions, witches, fairies, Prospero's spirits, the gods in the other final romances. These are much more the apparatus of the drama than what it truly gives us. Of such matters it is easy enough to say: "Oh, these things were at least imaginable for them," but perhaps their belief was as minimal as ours. What I have been concerned with is the main substance of the plays—the things about human experience that they deal with quite irrespective of whether or not we accept the manifestation of the supernatural. I think I have been dealing with something more important than paraphernalia.

All drama, we have seen, is incredible, and Jacobean drama more than most—because of its mixed kind, now making a demand on us to accept a quasi-replica, now defying us to do so. But, through the very nature of its mixed kind, it brings us up against the essential nature of drama. Ever since its time, drama has played to and fro between the formal and the informal: from Restoration comedy to the best works of the late nineteenth century (that is, from Etherege to Shaw) we have experienced this interplay. Shaw and Etherege are as far beyond belief in their ways as Webster and Ford were: the kind of prose they write, as Eliot has reminded us, is as formal as dramatic verse can be; they are remote from actuality, too, in their overt handling of character and situation. *The Man of Mode* and *Misalliance* give us word-play and event that exist on the fringe of the imaginable, yet, with all their "heightening," they shadow forth things that we know. Again we face the fact that in its own way actuality is as incredible as anything the theater presents. Which of us could credit the way of our living if we did not experience it day and night? Its ecstasies and its horrors, its gentle pleasures and its embarrassing fumbings, are incredible indeed. Perhaps there lies the root of man's invention of art, the embodiment—in a different guise—of the incredible that he lives through in every moment. The use of a different guise, the deliberate shifting of focus, gives us a feeling of respite. In the theater at its highest level we have perhaps the ultimate embodiment of incredibility, and therefore the most exacting image of life itself.

NOTE

This is a revised version of a paper given at the Stratford-upon-Avon Shakespeare Conference in 1972. It is closely linked with my British Academy Shakespeare Lecture for 1973, on "Shakespeare's Tragic Fiction," and also with my paper on "The Incredibility of Jonsonian Comedy" given at the Ben Jonson Conference held in Toronto in 1972 (which will be published in the Proceedings of that Conference).